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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S EU REFERENDUM: "NO" HAS THE MOMENTUM AS
MAY 29 APPROACHES

REF: PARIS 3492

Classified By: Acting DCM Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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1. (C) Summary: When President Chirac addresses a national audience May 26 to urge a vote in favor of the EU constitution three days later, he may be talking to an electorate that has largely made up its mind -- to vote no. Opinion polls and many of the country's sharpest political commentators agree an opinion shift has occurred over the past few days, with the "no" vote developing a gathering momentum. With reports that defenders of the constitution, including mayors in daily contact with their grassroots constituents, have stopped campaigning, the dynamic of a self-fulfilling prophecy may be in play. Signs now point to a rejection of the draft constitution, for a multiplicity of reasons. For the increasingly demoralized "yes" camp, Chirac's last effort to defend the text may be too little, too late. End summary.

2. (C) All ten of the most recent polls have pointed to a solidifying lead of no voters. The latest, on May 25, gives a 54-to-46-percent advantage to opponents of the constitution (among the 80 percent of the electorate who have decided how they will vote). Reacting to this drumbeat of consistent results, and based on an almost palpable sense that French voters simply want to say "no," most well-informed observers and politicians are coming to the same conclusion: French voters will turn down the referendum on May 29. Over a Charge-hosted lunch for visiting NEA PDAS Liz Cheney May 25, the talk from an assemblage of some of France's top political analysts and columnists was all about the EU constitution. Our guests agreed that over the past few days, there has been a definite shift towards a consolidation of the "no" vote. Dominique Moisi, Deputy Director of the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), told the Charge and PDAS Cheney that his May 26 IHT column will call the vote for the "no," citing three reasons: retrospective and prospective doubts about EU enlargement; a national "malaise," fed in particular by high and stubborn unemployment; and, the desire to sanction France's distant and out-of-touch political elite, with Chirac being the biggest target. All of those present agreed that an ambient fear of the future, in particular the fear of losing jobs to less well-paid workers in the new EU member states will be a major generator of a "no" vote Sunday.

3. (C) Just back from visits to Marseille and Bordeaux in the south, the Canadian and UK DCMs told the Charge earlier May 25 that they, too, sense a clear shift toward rejection of the constitution by a majority of voters on May 29 and are reporting this back to London and Ottawa. Moisi noted that pro-Constitution mayors in his home region have ceased campaigning for the yes, having concluded that the majority of their constituents have made up their minds to vote no. Even informal observations at polling places in many cities and towns outside Paris (which are plastered with campaign posters in the days before the referendum) suggest that opponents of the constitution are more active than their pro-constitution counterparts. The cumulative effect of so many successive polls pointing to a no victory appears to have created a snowball effect that Chirac will have difficulty stopping when he makes his last-minute appeal to the nation Thursday night.

4. (C) Turn-out could yet be critical. It is generally thought that a heavy turnout on May 29 will help the yes vote. If the yes side, seen as less motivated, can nevertheless get out its vote and large segments of the anti-government no vote decide that staying away from the polls is as good a way to register their protest as voting no, the yes may yet emerge victorious. Barring these developments, however, most signs point to French voters rejecting the EU constitution May 29. Septels will offer our analysis of the consequences of the vote for French domestic politics and for France in Europe. End comment.
WOLFF